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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**HPTLC ASSAY OF THYMOQUINONE IN BLACK SEED AND BLACK SEED OIL (NIGELLA SATIVA LINN) AND IDENTIFICATION OF THYMOQUINONE CONVERSION WITH UV-VIS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

A reliable and simplified quantitative high performance thin-layer chromatography (HPTLC) method for the determination of the bioactive constituent of the commercially available black seed and black seed oil using a scanning densitometer is described. The identification of thymoquinone spot obtained from 80% aq. MeOH extract of the seed is confirmed by Nuclear Magnetic Spectroscopy (NMR). The solvent system consisted of hexane and dichloromethane (1:1) were used and all the spot visualised and quantitated at 254 nm. The thymoquinone content of freshly pressed black seed oil was 1.3%, while that of the seed was 1%. Furthermore UV-Vis measurement is significantly used for swift relative comparison of thymoquinone levels in black seed oils and to follow the transformation of thymoquinone when the oil is exposed to sunlight.

**Keywords:** *Nigella sativa*; black seed; black cumin; black cumin oil; thymoquinone.

**INTRODUCTION**

*Nigella sativa* L. (Ranunculaceae), commonly known as black seed or black cumin is an erect, usually profusely branched herb growing up to 0.7 m tall. It is cultivated as a crop for its black seeds at altitudes between 1500-2500 m, in East Africa, the Middle East, Mediterranean countries, Russia, South Asia etc. *Nigella sativa* whole seed (NSWS), when physically pressed gives 36 - 38% *Nigella sativa* pressed oil (NSPO) and when steam distilled 0.4 - 2.5% essential oil<sup>1</sup>. In Ethiopia black seed is known as Tiqu Azmud (Amh), where it is used to flavor bread and as additive in the preparation of the hot spice Berbere. Fixed oil of *Nigella sativa* and derived thymoquinone inhibit eicosanoid generation in leukocytes and membrane lipid peroxidation<sup>2</sup>. "The oil from plants grown in Ethiopia is held in greatest esteem" due to high content of thymoquinone, the most important bioactive component of the seed<sup>3</sup>.

In folk medicine of many countries black cumin seeds and the expressed oil are used as medicines. These products have been found to have very low degree of toxicity, as manifested by high LD50 value, key hepatic enzyme stability and organ integrity, all suggesting a wide margin of safety for therapeutic use<sup>4</sup>. Acute and chronic toxicity of *Nigella sativa* fixed oil. Biological activities of black cumin corroborated by scientific studies include: analgesic and anti-inflammatory activities<sup>5</sup>. Black cumin seed essential oil, as a potent analgesic and anti-inflammatory drug<sup>6</sup>. The *in vivo* antifungal Activity of the aqueous extract from *Nigella sativa* seeds<sup>6</sup>. Antiasthmatic effect of *Nigella sativa* in

airways of asthmatic patients, Immunosuppressive, and cytotoxic properties of *Nigella sativa*<sup>7</sup>. Anti-allergic Effect of *Nigella sativa* (black seed) on subjective feeling in patients with allergic diseases<sup>8</sup>. Anticonvulsant, Anticonvulsant effects of thymoquinone, the major constituent of *Nigella sativa* seeds, in mice<sup>9</sup>. Blood glucose lowering, hypoglycemic effect of *Nigella sativa* oil is mediated by extra pancreatic actions<sup>10</sup>. Acute and chronic toxicity of *Nigella sativa* fixed oil<sup>11</sup>. Antioxidant activity and phenolic content of phenolic rich fractions obtained from black cumin<sup>12</sup>.

It is now evident from the above cited scientific studies that most of the biological activities of black seed are due to thymoquinone (TQ), the principal secondary metabolite present both in the seeds as well as in NSPO. Since both the seeds and expressed oil contain TQ, we thought it would be interesting to undertake a comparative study of the level of TQ in the seeds and the expressed oil in order to clarify the pros and cons of using the seeds or the expressed oil in therapy.

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## EXPERIMENTAL

### Plant material and pressed oil

*Nigella sativa* whole seed (NSWS) was purchased from market in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. NSPO (*Nigella sativa* pressed oil) was obtained by pressing NSWS and also by purchasing oil from local commercial producers.

### Isolation of TQ

Powdered seeds of black cumin (10 g) were soaked in 80% aq. MeOH (70 ml), placed on a shaker for 4 h and filtered. The marc was extracted one more time by same solvent. Water was added to the combined filtrates to make the solution 50% aq. MeOH. This was then extracted twice using 50 ml  $\text{CHCl}_3$ . The lower organic layer was separated, dried with anhyd  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4$ , and concd to give dark brown gummy extract, that was subjected to CC on silica gel. Elution was carried out using hexane/ $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  (7:3), monitoring the separation of TQ by TLC (1:1, hexane/  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ ), which yielded pure TQ, confirmed by its  $^1\text{H}$ , C-13, DEPT-135 and UV spectra.

### Preparation of standard reference TQ solution

10 mg of pure TQ obtained from the CC dissolved in methanol in 10 ml volumetric flask (1 mg/ml or 1  $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$ ).

### Extraction of powdered black seed

To 50 mg of seed placed in 10 ml volumetric flask was added 10 ml methanol and sonicated for 20 min followed by shaking for 4 h.

### NSPO solution Preparation

To 50 mg of freshly pressed oil placed in 10 ml volumetric flask was added 10 ml methanol and sonicated for 30 min.

### Working procedure for Camag HPTLC Analysis

From the above standard TQ Reference Solution, 2  $\mu\text{l}$ , 4  $\mu\text{l}$ , 6  $\mu\text{l}$  were applied respectively on tracks 1-3 of the TLC plate using Camag Linomat 5 Sample Applicator. On tracks 4 and 5, 60  $\mu\text{l}$  and 80  $\mu\text{l}$  of the methanol extract of the seeds were applied respectively. From the NSPO solution 60  $\mu\text{l}$  was applied on track 6. The TLC plate was then developed using solvent system (1:1  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ /hexane), and the optical density of the unknown concentration scanned with the scanning densitometer of the CAMAG HPTLC instrument.

### Calibration curve with TQ

2  $\mu\text{l}$ , 4  $\mu\text{l}$ , 6  $\mu\text{l}$  and 12  $\mu\text{l}$  of the above TQ Reference Solution were applied on 4 tracks of the TLC plate, and then developed using the above solvent system and the optical density scanned.

Relative comparison of TQ levels in different NSPO samples using UV-Vis spectrometry:

NSPO (10 mg) was dissolved in 10 ml hexane: ethanol (1:9) and diluted to 0.01 mg/ml, and its uv-vis spectrum measured.

### Following transformation of TQ in sunlight by UV-VIS

NSPO (200 mg) was placed in sun-light and 10 mg withdrawn after 15 minutes then dissolved in (1 ml hexane: 19 ml ethanol), an aliquot was taken and transferred to the measuring cell and the Uv-Vis measurement was done.

### Recovery of TQ in black seed

The methanol extract of black cumin (50 mg) and NSPO was spiked with 10 mg internal TQ standard. The spiked sample was extracted with methanol (10 ml) to give 1  $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$  internal standard. From this 10  $\mu\text{l}$  was spotted on one TLC plate corresponding to the application of 1.05  $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$  and 1.08  $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$  internal standard plus TQ in the methanol extract of the black cumin seed and in the methanol extract of NSPO respectively. To obtain the recovery value, the spiked sample was analyzed three times during one day and by dividing experimental value by the theoretical value.

### Apparatus and instrumental conditions

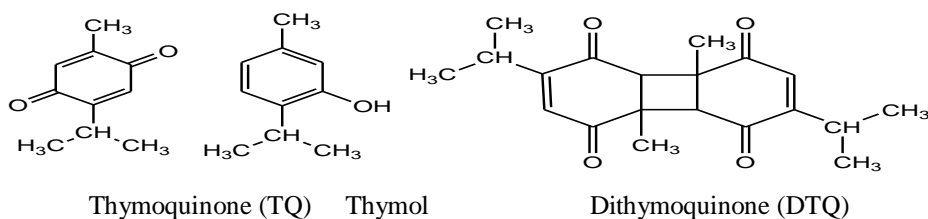
The measurements were carried out by using a CAMAG HPTLC (Switzerland) model Scanner III and Linomat 5, equipped with deuterium, mercury, and tungsten lamps. The quantification was done using densitometric evaluation in the absorption mode at 520 nm. Parameters such as slit size, scanning speed, and data resolution were adjusted to 5.0 x 0.45 mm, 20 mm/s, and 100  $\mu\text{m}/\text{step}$  were adjusted respectively. Other parameters such as, scan start position, scan end position, distance between tracks were monitored using win CATS software.

$^1\text{H}$  and  $^{13}\text{C}$  NMR spectral measurements were done on Bruker ACQ 400 AVANCE Spectrometer operating at 400 MHz equipped with 5 mm multinuclear probe and running Topspin 2.1 software at 298K.

The UV-Vis spectral experiment was done using T 60 U spectrophotometer (PG instruments, UK) which is equipped with deuterium and tungsten lamp. The running parameters controlled by UV-win software.

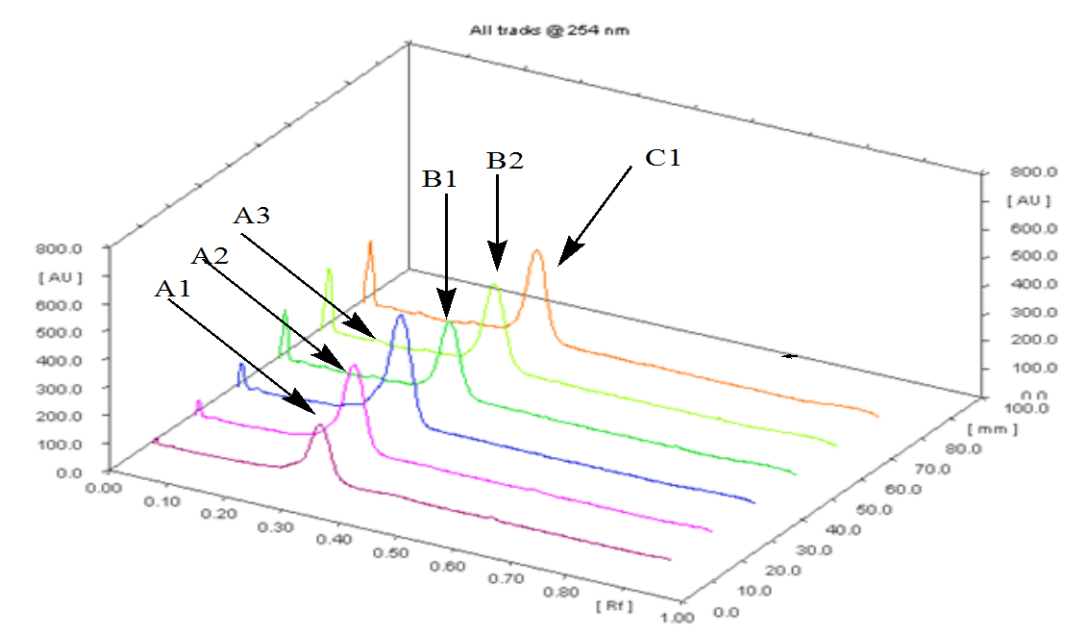
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is well known that the substance which is most responsible for the diverse biologically activity of black cumin seeds and its pressed oil is TQ. Three previous reports dealing with TQ level determinations of black seed oils were conducted on oil samples from commercial sources and reported levels of 0.2% or less. Fixed oil of *Nigella sativa* and derived thymoquinone inhibit eicosanoid generation in leukocytes and membrane lipid peroxidation [6]. To the best of our knowledge there is no report on the level of TQ in NSWS. We have used a simplified extraction procedure and an efficient and reliable quantitative Camag HPTLC method (Fig. 1) to determine level of TQ in NSWS and NSPO on one TLC plate.

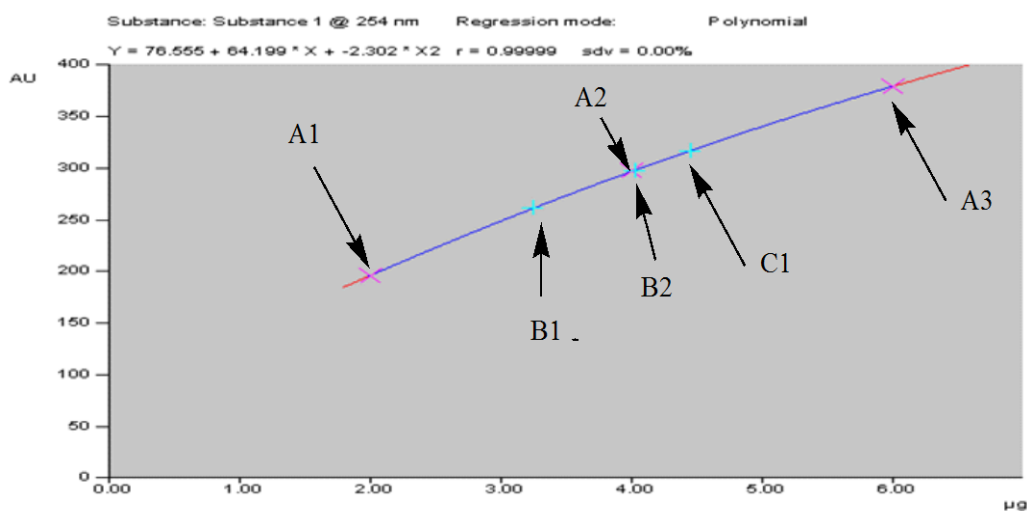


Extraction of 10 g of black seeds as described above gave 1.5 g, 15%, of dark brown gum, which when subjected to CC gave 60 mg (0.6%) of pure TQ ( $R_f = 0.3$ , 1:1, hexane/ $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ ),  $^1\text{H}$  NMR and  $^{13}\text{C}$  spectra consistent

with the structure below, UV  $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 253$ . This sample was used as standard reference for the determination of the unknown extract.



**Figure 1:** The three-dimensional CAMAG HPTLC image at 254 nm of standard TQ (A1, A2, A3: three concentrations 2  $\mu\text{g}$ , 4  $\mu\text{g}$ , 6  $\mu\text{g}$ ); unknown concentrations of: the methanol extract of NSWs B1 (60  $\mu\text{l}$ ), B2 (80  $\mu\text{l}$ ) and NSPO C1 (60  $\mu\text{l}$ ). Using the Polynomial regression curve shown below in Fig. 2, the levels of TQ in NSWs and in NSPO can be determined directly from the densitometric regression curve on the x-axis shown in Fig 2.



**Figure 2:** Polynomial regression curve graph via height of standard reference TQ (A1, A2, A3: three concentrations 2  $\mu\text{g}$ , 4  $\mu\text{g}$ , 6  $\mu\text{g}$ ). Unknown concentrations of: the methanol extract of NSWs B1 (60  $\mu\text{l}$ ), B2 (80  $\mu\text{l}$ ) and NSPO C1 (60  $\mu\text{l}$ ) showing the densitometric concentration of the unknown obtained after developing the TLC and scanning on the HPTL scanner III on the x-axis with pink color.

**Table 1:** Summary of the results of TQ level determinations of the methanol extracts of NSWs and NSPO, showing level of TQ in the seeds and oil to be 1.0% and 1.3% respectively which is clearly shown in the polynomial regression curve via height (\* Average of 3 determinations).

Track	Volume applied per track	Peak height at 254 nm Mean $\pm$ S.D.	Peak area at 254 nm Mean $\pm$ S.D.	Derived Amount from the peak height of the polynomial curve Mean $\pm$ S.D.	Derived Amount from the peak area Mean $\pm$ S.D.	Average amount and % of TQ from peak height and area
A1	2 $\mu$ l (2 $\mu$ g)	137.8 $\pm$ 0.08	4995.4 $\pm$ 0.02			
A2	4 $\mu$ l (4 $\mu$ g)	224.8 $\pm$ 0.15	7819.4 $\pm$ 0.03			
A3	6 $\mu$ l (6 $\mu$ g)	317.6 $\pm$ 0.09	10418.5 $\pm$ 0.04			
B1	60 $\mu$ l (unknown)	221.8 $\pm$ 0.16	5948.4 $\pm$ 0.05	3.3 $\pm$ 0.05 $\mu$ g	2.7 $\pm$ 0.07 $\mu$ g	3.0 $\mu$ g (1%)
B2	80 $\mu$ l (unknown)	242.7 $\pm$ 0.14	6546.4 $\pm$ 0.08	4.1 $\pm$ 0.02 $\mu$ g	3.1 $\pm$ 0.05 $\mu$ g	3.6 $\mu$ g (1%)
C1	60 $\mu$ l (unknown)	280.6 $\pm$ 0.15	6909.4 $\pm$ 0.04	4.6 $\pm$ 0.04 $\mu$ g	3.3 $\pm$ 0.04 $\mu$ g	4.0 $\mu$ g (1.3%)

### Recovery of TQ in NSWs and NSPO

The recovery of TQ was determined using the quantitative CAMAG HPTLC method by dissolving a known amount of the pure internal standard in the methanol extracts of NSWs and NSPO. In both cases 97% of the added TQ was recovered. The intra-day determination (n = 3) of TQ level in NSWs extract gave a mean value of 10.25, while that of NSPO gave 10.52. These correspond to a relative standard deviation of  $\pm 1.5\%$  and  $\pm 2.10\%$  for NSWs and NSPO respectively. The developed TLC method for quantification of TQ showed correlation coefficient which is clearly seen in the **Figure 2**, polynomial regression curve graph via height ( $r = 0.99999$ ) in the concentration range of 2 to 12  $\mu$ g with respect to the peak height and area.

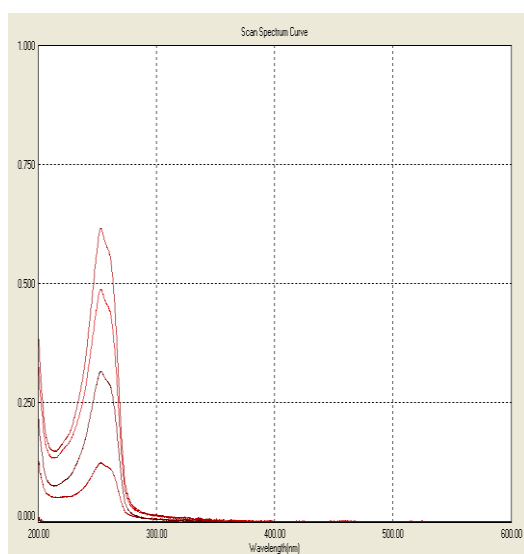
### Linearity

Polynomial regression curve via height in the calibration curves were constructed over the range of 1  $\mu$ g - 12  $\mu$ g

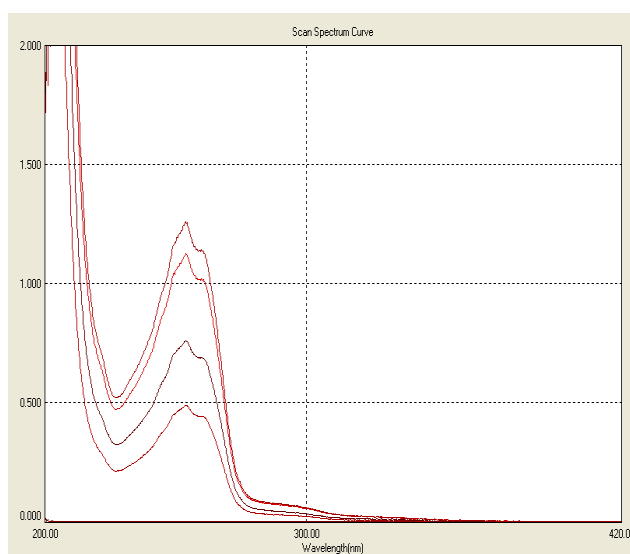
with the correlation coefficient 0.99999, (n = 3). Fig. 2 clearly shows the correlation coefficient generated directly from the quantitative CAMAG HPTLC instrument during the quantitative TQ determination in the methanol extracts of NSWs and NSPO. Each determination was done on one TLC plate where n = 3, corresponding to reference TQ and NSWs and NSPO extract samples.

### UV-Vis spectrum of TQ and NSPO

The potential of using UV-Vis measurements for detection and relative comparison of TQ levels in different oils is evident from the following experiments. The UV-Vis spectra of different concentrations of reference TQ (0.002, 0.004, 0.006, 0.008 mg/ml), generated in ethanol ( $\lambda_{\text{max}}$ : 253 nm), are shown in Fig. 3. A similar linear curve was obtained when spectra were generated using 0.1, 0.2, 0.3 and 0.4 mg/ml of freshly prepared NSPO dissolved in hexane/EtOH (1:9).

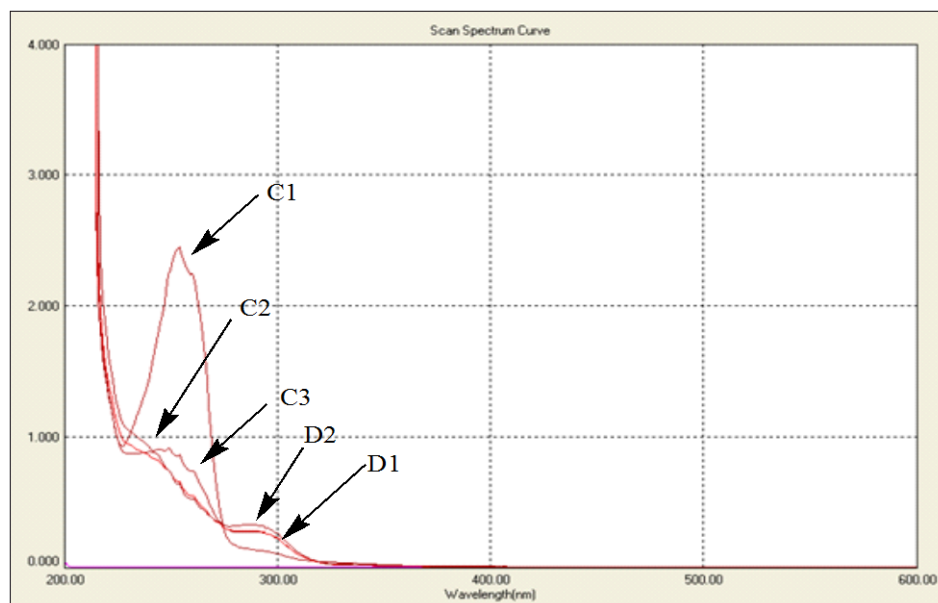


**Figure 3 (TQ)**



**Figure 4 (NSPO)**

**Figure 3 and 4:** UV-Vis spectrum at different concentrations of the standard reference thymoquinone and Nigella sativa pressed oil showing the fresh TQ before exposure to sunlight.



**Figure 5:** Uv-Vis spectrum of NSPO after exposure to direct sun-light for 0 (C1), 30 (C2) and 45 (C3) minutes showing gradual decline of the starting TQ (C1) and appearance of D1 and D2 peaks is due to its conversion products to DTQ and thymol <sup>2</sup>.

### Stability study of NSPO

Fig. 5 clearly shows the quick transformation of TQ when exposed to direct sunlight. Random analysis of commercial oil samples obtained from different sources showed gross variations in the TQ levels depending on their age and storage conditions. These results indicate why previous determinations of TQ levels reported in the literature are very low <sup>3</sup>. Fixed oil of *Nigella sativa* and derived thymoquinone inhibit eicosanoid generation in leukocytes and membrane lipid peroxidation yielded much lower levels (ca. 0.2%) relative to our results here of 1.3% in NSPO and 1% in NSWs. Further study is required to determine storage conditions and shelf life of NSPO.

### CONCLUSION

An efficient high performance thin-layer chromatography (HPTLC) method has been developed to

assay the levels of thymoquinone in seeds and pressed oil of commercially available black cumin. UV-Vis spectroscopic measurements can also be used to monitor stability of TQ and also to compare its levels in different commercial black seed oil samples. It can be concluded from this study; in particular in view of the closeness of TQ levels in the seed (1.0%) and pressed oil (1.3%), ingesting the seeds for therapy is almost as good as taking the oil. These results are significant in view of the large difference in price between black seed and its oil. It can be concluded from this study; in particular in view of the closeness of thymoquinone levels in the seed (1.0%) and pressed oil (1.3%), ingesting the seeds for therapy is almost as equivalent as taking the oil.

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